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ABSTRACT

A survey was administered to parents aged 30 to 70 years from 90 households. The instrument included items assessing the subject's perception of their child's self esteem and activities, their spouse's self esteem, and overall lifestyle satisfaction. The first 14 questions asked the subjects to describe their child's personality using a 4-point Likert-format scale. The next 13 items asked the participants to rate their reasons for encouraging their children to participate in various structured activities. The final 13 items asked the participants to rate their spouse's personality and esteem, as well as overall family functioning, using a f-point Likert-format scale. Two-parent families were then divided into two groups: working mother households and stay-at-home mother households. Between group t-tests revealed few significant differences between respondents from two-paycheck and one-paycheck households. However, children in stay-at-home households were perceived by their fathers as less disciplined than those in homes where mothers worked at least part-time outside of the home. Fathers in homes where mothers do not work outside the home were also found to be more likely to perceive their wives to be more manipulated by the children than fathers from two-paycheck families. Husbands whose wives were not employed also rated their children as being more anxious than fathers whose wives were employed. (Contains 15 references.) (Author)

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The Relationship between Maternal Employment and Perceptions of Child, Spouse, and Self

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Abstract

A survey was administered to parents aged 30 to 70 years from 90 households. The instrument included items assessing the subject's perception of their child's self esteem and activities, their spouse's self esteem, and overall lifestyle satisfaction. The first 14 questions asked the subjects to describe their child's personality using a 4-point Likert-format scale. The next 13 items asked the participants to rate their reasons for encouraging their children to participate in various structured activities. The final 13 items asked the participants to rate their spouse's personality and esteem, as well as overall family functioning, using a 4-point Likert-format scale. Two-parent families were then divided into two groups: working mother households and stay-at-home mother households. Between groups t-tests revealed few significant differences between respondents from two-paycheck and one-paycheck households. However, children in stay-at-home households were perceived by their fathers as less disciplined than those in homes where mothers worked at least part time outside of the home. Fathers in homes where mothers do not work outside the home were also found to be more likely to perceive their wives to be more manipulated by the children than fathers from two-paycheck families. Husbands whose wives were mot employed also rated their children as being more anxious than fathers whose wives were employed.

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Introduction

The relationship between maternal employment and the perceptions of the individuals within families has been extensively studied, in an effort to determine the effects of maternal employment (particularly upon children). Since the 1950's, the number of women in the workforce has steady increased, as noted by the U.S. Bureau of Census (2002). It was noted that in the 1950's only 16 percent of children had working mothers; by 1997 the number had risen to 70 percent (Coontz, 1997). Some studies have explored whether maternal employment affects the child's attachment (Chira, 1998) and others have investigated the impact of maternal employment on the child's social, behavioral and emotional development (Harvey, 1999; Hoffman, 1989).

In 2001, Vander Ven, Cullen, Carrozza, and Wright investigated the association between maternal employment and the development of delinquency in children. This and several other studies support the theory that delinquency is due to the lack of supervision and the negative peer contact sometimes associated with a mother's working, rather than maternal employment per se. Additional research by Roxburgh (1997) examined the effect of children on working mothers by sampling 500 Canadian women. Roxburgh focused on resources (job control, partner support) and demands (job demands and strain in the home) in the roles of parent, worker, and partner. Employed mothers were significantly less distressed when partner support and job control were high. However, these findings also indicate that when job control is high and partner support is low, working mothers are significantly more distressed.

Similarly, Lennon and Rosenfeld (1992) concluded that greater job control moderates the effects of the mothers' role. Women in the paid labor force experience higher rates of depression and anxiety compared to men (Myers et al.,1984; Robins et al., 1984; Turner, Wheaton, & Lloyd 1995). Some argue that the evolution of the American family has created many new obstacles for working mothers. Excessive role demands on women were found to increase depression and anxiety (Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldstein, 1990).

The goal of the present study was to evaluate whether parental perceptions of children, spouse, and self vary as a function of family type (single paycheck versus two paycheck, as a function of maternal employment). Based on widespread assumptions about the value of mothers' presence in the home, parents within single paycheck families where the mothers were not employed (single paycheck families) were expected to evaluate their children more positively than parents from two paycheck families. If traditional division of responsibilities also confers advantages on the marital relationship, husbands from single paycheck families might be expected to rate their wives more positively on various personality characteristics than husbands from two paycheck families. Similarly, it might be anticipated that wives from single paycheck families might rate their husbands more favorably. If traditional, single paycheck families are more conducive to optimal adult functioning, parents from such households might be expected to report higher self esteem and a more internal locus of control.

Method

Subjects:

The subjects used in this study were 171 parents. The sample consisted of men and women who ranged in age from 23 to 75 years (x=42.58, s.d.=9.58). The mean number of children for each parent was (sons' 79 mean age=13.8; daughters' 93 mean age= 14.4).

Procedure:

The packet used in this study was handed out to subjects who volunteered at work or in their home neighborhoods. Participants were asked to fill out the packet in its entirety, and were assured that all responses would be kept strictly confidential.

In part one, subjects were asked to provide demographic information and to answer questions concerning their and their spouses' career and family experiences and expectations. These questions also required subjects to disclose information concerning their job characteristics and work preferences.

Part two of the packet was made up of the BACMEC questionnaire (Greenberger et al., 1988). The BACMEC is a 24-item scale developed to measure Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children. The BACMEC included beliefs about both benefits (13 items) and costs (11 items). Studies of five samples (n=375) have demonstrated that the total BACMEC scale along with subscales are highly reliable and have good convergent, divergent, and concurrent validity (Greenberger et al. 1988).

In part three of the packet, subjects were asked to respond to ten 4-point Likert scale items concerning their attitudes toward their mother and father. Subjects were also asked to disclose information about their mother's work status during preschool years (0 to 5 years old) and school years (6 to 18 years old). The subjects were asked to report whether their mothers were employed part-time, fulltime, or not employed outside the home during each stage of development, and if their mother's work was out of financial necessity. Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's position; indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue- collar work. Subjects were also asked to indicate whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household.

Part four of the questionnaire consisted of the Mini Markers Five Factors Personality Scale (Saucier, 1994), designed to give a quick assessment of the subject's personality according to the Big Five Trait model. This scale lists 40 alphabetized personality traits, 8 applying to each of the five basic dimensions of personality, including neuroticism (the general tendency to experience negative affect), extraversion (tendency to be sociable, assertive, active, and talkative), intellectance (tendency to display active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity, and independent judgment), agreeableness (tendency to be altruistic, sympathetic, and eager to help others), and conscientiousness (tendency to be organized, strong-willed, and purposeful). The subjects rated the degree to which they possess each trait on a 9-point Likert-format scale.

Part five of the questionnaire consisted of five author-devised items assessing life satisfaction, using a 4-point Likert-format scale. On a similar 5-point scale, subjects were

asked to rate several of their spouse's activities. Areas included child interaction, job, and relationship involvement. Participants with children still living at home were then asked to answer a series of questions regarding hours spent engaged in various activities.

Part six of the packet consisted of the 10-item Rosenberg Self Concept Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which was used to measure self-esteem. Subjects were asked to indicate on a 4-point Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements assessing participants' perceptions of their self worth and competence.

The next part of the questionnaire, an author-devised survey, consisted of 40 items assessing the subject's perception of their child's esteem and activities, spouse esteem, and overall lifestyle. The first 14 questions asked the subjects to describe their child's personality using a 4-point Likert-format scale. The next 13 items asked the participants to rate their reasons for encouraging their children to participate in structured activities. The final 13 items asked the participants to rate their spouse's personality and esteem, as well as overall family functioning using a 4-point Likert-format scale.

The final portion of the questionnaire consisted of Ferguson's Brief Locus of Control Scale (Ferguson, 1993). This scale consists of ten forced-choice items excerpted from Rotter's Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966).

Results

Directionally adjusted items were totaled to create summary self esteem and locus of control scores for each participant. High scores on the locus of control scale indicate a more external locus. Responses from currently divorced or separated parents were excluded from subsequent analyses. All husbands included in the following analyses were employed at the time they completed the survey.

Subjects were divided into two groups (mother employed versus mother non-employed) on the basis of their families' current maternal work status. Separate analyses were conducted for male and female respondents. Independent samples t-tests comparing the two maternal employment groups using the data obtained from the male participants revealed a significant difference between husbands whose wives were employed outside the home, and those whose wives were non-employed on three measures of child's functioning. Husbands whose wives were not employed were more likely to characterize their children as undisciplined ($t=2.68$, $df=63$, $p<.01$), anxious ($t=2.46$, $df=65$, $p<.05$), and as manipulating their mothers ($t=2.20$, $df=65$, $p<.05$) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Husbands' perceptions of children's functioning based on wives' employment status
Ratings of child's level of self discipline:

	Mean	s.d.	n
Mother Employed	1.98	.93	51
Mother Non-employed	2.71	.83	14

Husbands' ratings of child's level of anxiety:

	Mean	s.d.	n
Mother Employed	1.89	.80	53
Mother Non-employed	2.5	.94	14

Ratings of child's level of manipulation of mother:

	Mean	s.d.	n
Mother Employed	1.7	.90	53
Mother Non-employed	2.4	1.1	14

T-test comparisons of ratings of children by mothers revealed no significant family type (single versus two paycheck) differences. The mean score for each of the child evaluation items was in the favorable range for both mothers from single parent families and those from two paycheck families.

Independent samples t-tests on ratings of spouse characteristics indicated no significant differences between husbands whose wives were employed and husbands whose wives were not employed. The variables assessed included perceptions of the spouse's laziness, happiness, being overworked, responsibility, disorganization, anxiety, and tendencies to be outgoing and easy going. Similarly, no significant differences emerged between spousal ratings of employed wives and non-employed wives. However, there was a trend ($p=.07$) suggesting that wives who were not employed were a bit more likely to perceive their spouses as being overworked.

Independent samples t-tests showed that none of the measures assessing attitudes about self revealed significant differences across family type. No significant differences between types of household emerged on either husbands' or wives' self esteem measures. Similarly, no differences in locus of control were found between parents from one-paycheck and two-paycheck families.

Discussion

Over the years as more and more women have entered the workforce, whether by choice or need, there has been much discussion about the effect that working mothers might have on their family as well as themselves. The results of the present study provided little support for the assumption that single paycheck families offer measurable advantages to their members. The ratings of children failed to show that parents in single paycheck families evaluate their children more favorably than parents in two paycheck families. In the families sampled here, maternal ratings were very similar (and quite

positive), regardless of maternal work status. Contrary to expectation, husbands from single paycheck families were actually more critical of their children than husbands from two paycheck families, perceiving them as more lacking in discipline, more anxious, and more manipulative of their mothers.

This difference may be attributable to self selection factors. Husbands who choose to have more traditional single paycheck households may have higher expectations for their children. These higher standards may account for these fathers' more negative ratings. Alternatively, it may be that these fathers have less contact with their children, and may therefore fashion more unrealistic, age-inappropriate expectations for their children. As a consequence, these fathers might rate their children more negatively.

Another way that self selection may have contributed to the observed findings involves the possibility that maternal employment may have been influenced by children's problems. It may be that less disciplined, more anxious, more manipulative children may predispose their mothers to remain at home, possibly by making it difficult for them to rely on babysitters or child care settings. The more negative ratings of the I\single paycheck family fathers may therefore be due to these more difficult children's having increased the likelihood of their mothers' being nonemployed. However, the fact that the mothers' ratings did not reflect this raises questions about the validity of this explanation.

Another possibility is that husbands from two paycheck families, who presumably share more in parenting, might rate their children more favorably due to self protectiveness. Since this same type of self protectiveness might be expected to influence all the mothers' ratings, a future comparison of the ratings from the four parent groups (single paycheck fathers, single paycheck mothers, two paycheck fathers, two paycheck mothers) might be illuminating.

The results may also be attributable to defensiveness on that part of parents from nontraditional two paycheck families. It may be that these parents are prone to exaggerate the virtues of their children in order to justify their lifestyle choice. However, the failure to find differences in the ratings between the two groups of mothers challenges this explanation.

It is also conceivable that fathers from two paycheck families rate thei hildren less negatively because they spend less time with them, and are therefore less a ware of their behavioral problems. However, it seems unlikely that fathers from single paycheck families, who bear the sole responsibility for family income, would have greater contact and familiarity with their children than fathers whose wives share the family's financial burdens.

A final possibility is that the assumption that maternal employment disadvantages children may be false. Fathers from single paycheck families may be providing accurate appraisals of actual problems associated with single paycheck households. It may be that when mothers are primary caregivers and fathers are sole income producers, children may exhibit more problems involving self discipline, anxiety, and manipulation of their mothers.

The notion that maternal employment disadvantages the marital relationship and compromises adults' self esteem and perceptions of personal control were challenged by the results of this study. The failure to observe differences between single paycheck and

two paycheck families on either the spouse or self ratings supports the idea that there are few systematic differences between these two types of households.

One problem with the current investigation involves the relatively small number of families in the single paycheck group. Future research should attempt to obtain a larger sample of parents from such families. Another problem with this study is its correlational nature.

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